

## THE VALUE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT AND THE CUBAN ECONOMY

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### Introduction

It is widely documented that the Government of Cuba (GOC) and the Communist Party continue to violate the basic human right of religious freedom.<sup>1</sup> For decades they have espoused atheism as official policy for all Cuban citizens. In the international arena, they hide behind a carefully constructed façade of religious freedom while strictly repressing the practice of faith, usurping and undermining constitutional law via opaque, extralegal administrative instructions to police and courts.

Like other authoritarian governments threatened by independent civil society, Cuba tolerates faith organizations that promote constructive, peaceful and reconciliatory reform. As a result, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and churches have some agency to effect change at the grassroots level, especially when compared to other activist groups, such as the media whom the GOC completely distrusts.

Indeed, a growing network of Cuban churches and other faith-based organizations (FBOs) have come to serve as one of the few viable links between U.S. and international development and relief organizations and Cuban communities and individuals most in need. However, even this channel can be limited, as the GOC and the Communist Party actively work to suppress civil society and religious development, particularly among faiths that are not members of the government-controlled Cuba Council of Churches (CCC), which endorses the practice of selective legal registration of many Evangelical churches and non-Christian faiths.

Despite this repression, Cuba's faith community has been experiencing steady growth and diversification. Today, faith organizations are the largest and most cohesive, inclusive, and active segment of civil society. FBOs and churches often work through collaborative community networks to deliver social services and goods to at-risk, vulnerable and marginalized populations underserved by cash-strapped Cuba and its poorly focused government agencies. Faith leaders who are respected in their communities regularly speak out on government human rights abuses, the need for democratic change, and the importance of a peaceful reform process in Cuba.

While acknowledging that the GOC's abuses of religious freedoms are discouraging and onerous to the faith community, and that violations of human rights and repression of the Cuban people are in general fundamentally unconscionable, this paper is focusing on the important and positive role of FBOs in civil society development and their impact on the Cuban economy.

FBOs play a crucial role in community service delivery, civil society development, and political reform that advances democracy in Cuba. With deep roots in their communities, local FBOs distribute relief aid, advocate for marginalized people, and build community. U.S. religious groups, Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs) and International Non-Profit Organizations (INGOs) recognize, validate, and utilize these strengths and support U.S. and Cuban FBO involvement in aid programs without discrimination.

Humanitarian relief in Cuba by INGOs such as Oxfam is well documented and accounts for millions of dollars in aid. Less well known is the assistance provided

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (U.S. Department of State) Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and others.

by members of the U.S. faith-based community such as churches and smaller NGOs. This aid, which is neither fully understood nor well documented, accounts for a large amount of the in-kind support received by Cuba: calculated by the author as more than \$120 million in 2017<sup>2</sup>, with a multiplying effect which favorably impacts the Cuban economy. While no attempt was made to calculate the amount of cash contributed by individual churches to Cuban FBOs, the amount is likely to be significant.

### **The Role of FBOs in Leading Change**

The religious community forms Cuba's largest and most cohesive network of independent organizations, with size, scope, and influence that grant them an influential position in civil society. FBOs are trusted and respected sources of moral, intellectual, and democratic leadership that can carry out activities on a wide geographic scope, reaching populations and individuals that other groups cannot (e.g. prisoners). Around the world, communities view FBOs as conveners capable of gathering large numbers of people from a cross section of society, and churches as platforms for meaningful discussion.

With their religious mission and organizational capability, churches and other FBOs promote and advocate for human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and democratic values. They lead and facilitate dialogue for constructive, peaceful, and reconciliatory reform. These values increase their credibility with authoritarian governments such as the GOC that might otherwise feel threatened by political activists and calls for reform.

As organizations, churches and other FBOs build capacity and develop skills such as leadership, communication, relationship building, organizational development, accountability, and strategic planning through capacity development programs. In addition, churches work within collaborative networks to deliver social services to at-risk vulnerable and marginalized populations that often cannot be adequately reached by the government.

In today's Cuba, FBOs represent the most viable civil society platform for citizens to engage in dialogue, advocacy, and social and political mobilization.

### **The Role of FBOs in Civil Society Formation**

The first and last stronghold for civil society in Cuba is often the religious community. In a country where the majority of citizens are people of faith, the importance of the church in the voluntary sphere is even more pronounced. As Austen Ivereigh observes, "Networks of participation deepen involvement with others: most people get involved because someone they trust suggests it. While this is as true of religious as non-religious people, it is a simple fact that religion generates networks of participation that are far stronger, more lasting, and more committed than non-secular organizations are capable of."

As a result, FBO leaders--armed with their faith and trusted by their followers--are often the most outspoken and respected leaders when a government suppresses the voice of civil society. According to the UN, "Faith-based groups also have the potential to represent and reach out to those from diverse communities, including those most vulnerable to HIV, through the prism of humanity and compassion that all religions advocate. Faith, government, and civil society come together to uphold human rights and access to health for sexual minorities."

Religious activity reinforces tolerance and moral discernment, highlighting critical themes such as peaceful dialogue and reconciliation. Churches bring people together in ways no other organization can: close to the people they serve, they foster committed long-lasting relationships.

FBOs often serve as a platform for social mobilization, as seen in Nicaragua's grassroots backlash to proposed changes to the government pension scheme. Similarly, beginning in 2017, Catholic and Episcopal leaders openly supported the *movimiento campesino* which opposed construction of a Chinese-financed canal project that would displace up to 400,000 people. Evangelical churches in Nicaragua have also spoken

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<sup>2</sup> See section under Humanitarian Aid Import titled "Calculation Methodology."

out against government restrictions on their operations and ability to function as service deliverers, on electoral abuse, and on a variety of issues including the environment and advocacy for women and other vulnerable communities.

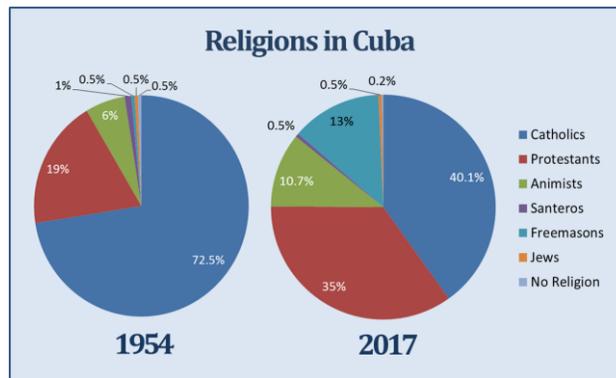
**The Landscape of FBOs in Cuba**

In 1954, a survey conducted by the University Catholic Group (ACU) to determine the religious feeling of the Cuban population found that 96.5% believe in the existence of God. According to the survey, Cubans identify with the following denominations: Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Spiritual.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1992, the Cuban Church has experienced substantial growth.<sup>4</sup> At the close of the 1980s, there were

only 12 officially registered Protestant congregations. By 2012, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 house churches spread across the country. Most are satellite congregations of churches that existed prior to the 1959 Revolution and belong to well-established denominations with a historic presence in Cuba. Most of these house churches have somewhere between 30 and 200 members who regularly attend services.

Currently, 58 officially registered Protestant denominations exist in Cuba. The largest Evangelical groups are Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba, Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, Assemblies of God, Los Pinos Nuevos, Evangelical League of Cuba, Methodist Church, and Adventists.



<sup>3</sup> *The Catholic Church in Cuba*. Edited by the Hope and Truth Press Office, Central Preparatory Commission for the Papal Visit. Las Siervas de los Corazones Traspasados de Jesús y María (The Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary). SCTJM.

<sup>4</sup> Johnstone, Patrick and Mandryk, Jason. Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster. 1993, p. 188.

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The growth of the Protestant church in Cuba is notable and has made a substantial impact on society. At the start of the Revolution, Cuban Protestants only numbered approximately 190,000; with gradual but strong growth, approximately 1.5 million Protestants are now registered with licensed denominations, and nearly four million identify themselves as Protestants or Evangelicals.

In regard to their relationship with the GoC, the Protestant Church falls into three categories:

- 1) The most politically privileged category of churches includes those registered by the GOC and members of the Cuba Council of Churches (CCC). This group consists of 51 smaller churches and centers, including Presbyterian, Episcopal, Orthodox, Yogas, and break-offs of the Protestant, Reformed, and Evangelical denominations. The CCC is managed by the GOC. While its claimed intent is to support free religion, in reality it serves to monitor and repress its members and other churches. The council's ties to the GOC, the Communist Party, and the GOC Office of Religious Affairs (recently renamed the Department of Religious Affairs) give its members relatively more flexibility to carry out religious activities and church-sponsored community services without complete government interference when compared to non-CCC churches. The GOC often allows members' social service programs to receive educational, financial, and material support from sister organizations in the U.S. This group represents less than 20% of the Protestant community.
- 2) The second category consists of 24 non-CCC member denominations registered with the government. These traditional church groups represent the greatest percentage of Protestant churches, encompassing seven large conventions with 3,210 churches and approx. 24,000 house churches. They work within the "tolerance" of the GOC with coercive dialogue and regular pressure to align to the GOC's interests. These churches are more scrutinized and repressed than CCC members, but they do benefit from registration. It should be noted that the

Catholic Church and the Jewish community are considered part of this group.

- 3) The third and most repressed category is comprised of unregistered churches and denominations all considered illegal by the GOC. It includes Evangelical churches and non-Christian faiths (such as Muslim and Buddhist) and the Santeria syncretic faiths. Churches in this category, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) are represented by approximately 90 groups, accounting for 12% of the Cuban Evangelical church. Since they are considered illegal, they are openly persecuted by the GOC.

Largest Evangelical Denominations	No. of churches	Church Registry
<b>Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba</b>	420	100,000
<b>Baptist Convention of Western Cuba</b>	515	108,000
<b>Assemblies of God</b>	700	300,000
<b>Los Pinos Nuevos</b>	400	140,000
<b>Evangelical League of Cuba</b>	175	80,000
<b>Methodist Church</b>	500	184,000
<b>Adventists</b>	500	80,000
<b>Other Protestants (51 denominations)</b>	1,190	208,000
<b>APPROX. TOTAL</b>	<b>4,400</b>	<b>1,200,000</b>

Approximate number of local churches	4,400
Officially authorized house churches	32,000

The Catholic Church (category 2) is now considered Cuba's strongest institution after the government itself. The estimated number of Cubans identifying as Catholic range from 40 to 60 percent, while about 35 percent identify as Protestants. The strength of the Catholic Church has been evident in the visits of the last three popes; their influence on Fidel and Raul Castro facilitated a number of key reforms.

Today, the Catholic Church is allowed to operate small pharmacies, after-school programs for children, night schools in language and business training for adults, care centers for elderly people and disabled people, specialized clinics, small libraries, and theological seminaries. The leading Catholic charity Caritas Cuba operates from a national office in Havana and serves marginalized people through 11 dioceses and 600 parish and community centers. With over 40 full-time staff and a network of 12,000 volunteers providing community services, it receives support through the international NGO Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which has distributed over \$60 million in relief and medical assistance since 1993.

### **Humanitarian Aid and Economic Impact**

Charity is a key tenet of Christianity. Christian humanitarian aid is delivered by Christian NGOs to alleviate the suffering of people around the world including Cuba. Humanitarian aid arises in areas where some churches choose to invest time and money in the spirit of compassion. Faith-based NGOs constitute nearly 60 percent of all U.S.-based foreign aid organizations, with the majority being Christian.

Throughout history, most charity and social work has been centered in faith organizations. The reflection and action after World War II that gave birth to the United Nations system, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the basic international institutions that still operate all drew inspiration from the ethical approaches and practical experience of many faith traditions. Today, an extraordinary array of faith-based organizations works in virtually every corner of the world. Often, they are the first to respond when humanitarian crises emerge. Since 1990 the involvement of U.S. FBOs in humanitarian assistance to Cuba has been extraordinary.

### **Churches in Faith-Based Aid**

In many ways, churches serve as brokers between evangelical NGOs and the individuals who provide the bulk of their funding. This is not surprising, given that many NGOs were born out of individual churches and church groups. Churches often serve as outright aggregators of donated funds that are channeled to NGOs through individual congregations or denominations.

The significance of individual religious affiliation to those endangered by crisis and conflict, the role of local faith communities, and the influence of local faith figures are increasingly understood as crucial components of effective emergency response by the international community. Experience has shown that communities rely on faith and faith institutions as part of their coping mechanism in time of disaster; this reliance enhances communication, sharing, and compassion, and offers courage, comfort, and hope. Local faith communities have the ability to leverage considerable resources in humanitarian response, including social capital, human resources, spiritual resilience, and facilities.

### **FBOs in Post Hurricane Relief and Assistance**

Faith-based organizations are uniquely situated to provide critical links to local faith communities in humanitarian contexts, facilitating rapid response to disasters and fostering resilience in local communities for recovery and peace building. Faith narratives have much to contribute in offering positive and deeply embedded language about human dignity, human relationships, and their meaning in shaping the human rights discourse. Therefore, the moral imperative of FBOs is to provide assistance to people of other faiths.

Since 2013, substantial collaborative hurricane relief efforts have been documented involving U.S religious NGOs and Cuban FBOs. A wide range of faith-based and faith inspired organizations engage in this work, with variable access to donors. FBOs have particular characteristics that provide both tangible and intangible benefits in specific contexts, particularly where individual recipients of aid and/or local partners are from the same faith community or established

ecumenical or interfaith councils, where pre-existing reservoirs of trust provide access to facilities and networks, including community gathering spaces for humanitarian and development operations, as well as local, motivated staff and volunteers, reducing duplication of aid and services. A sense of shared identity and priorities provides a shortcut to effective partnerships with local communities.

### **U.S. Based Faith-Based NGOs**

Popular and academic discourse often treat faith-based foreign aid as if it were a new phenomenon. Indeed, the Christian NGO sector has grown rapidly in the last half century. However, its roots run back to the dawn of the 19th century, when American Protestant churches began sending missionary workers around the world. Similar to largely state-sponsored Catholic missionaries who were venturing out hundreds of years earlier, Protestants often targeted the least developed regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They spread religious teachings and offered educational and social programs that became the building blocks of many countries' health and human services institutions.

Protestant "missions" activity predated and, in many respects, served as the original model for the private humanitarian sector that boomed in the wake of World War II. That history is so ingrained in Protestant culture that today, evangelical churches widely use the word "missions" to refer broadly to all of their international activities--whether welcoming new converts or drilling new wells. Accordingly, this report uses the term "missions" to mean all forms of evangelical international involvement, whether explicitly religious or not.

The majority of U.S.-based international assistance organizations today are religious. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, 59 percent (3,505) of international development organizations in 2015 were faith-based NGOs, representing 40 percent (\$12.5 billion) of gross NGO revenues. Among religious NGOs, Christian organizations are the dominant players. Three of the six largest U.S.-based international aid charities are Christian, with combined revenue of \$2.7 billion in 2014.

Many U.S. based faith-based NGOs provide direct assistance to churches and vulnerable populations in Cuba. Some, such as the Lutheran World Relief, Episcopal Relief and Development, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, and the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board, are associated to sister Cuban Christian denominations. But others, such as Mercy Corps and the Free Wheelchair Mission, provide assistance to all faith-based organizations regardless of affiliation.

Perhaps the two largest faith-based NGOs operating in Cuba are Caritas Cuba and Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA). Caritas Cuba works in coordination with other public actors that have common interests. Its main collaborators within the confederation are Caritas Switzerland, CRS, Caritas Spain, Caritas Germany, Kindermissionswerk (PMK), and Misereor. It also gains access to international collaboration via meetings of the European Commission for non-state actors in Cuba.

Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), a private U.S. voluntary organization, works with some of the most disadvantaged churches. OAA's humanitarian and relief work ensures that the most disadvantaged Cubans--often those punished for practicing their religion or for speaking out about basic human rights--are supported. To do so, OAA strengthens its church partners to be more effective humanitarian service providers and serve as the voices of an emerging civil society by providing technical capacity building and material resources to allow them to fulfill these roles. OAA's mission is facilitated through private sector donations and other grants.

OAA partners with local FBOs to help vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families to alleviate suffering and improve dignity and quality of life. Its main collaborators are Orphans Heart, Young Life, East West Ministries, Alpha International, World Impact, Hope 4 Kids, Feed My Starving Children, Mathew 25 Ministries, Feeding the Nations, Harvest international, Vitamin Angels, and many more, all who seek to expand ministry activities into Cuba. OAA's network extends across the entire island in partnership

with all of Cuba's independent Evangelical denominations and educational seminaries.

There are also many non-faith-based INGOs working in Cuba, such as Oxfam and CARE International. Oxfam has been working in Cuba since 1993; local members support equitable and sustainable development projects. Oxfam is particularly active in the eastern provinces of Cuba. CARE International has a country representative in Cuba. For hurricane relief, CARE International works in communities along the northern coast in the central provinces and assists with water, sanitation, hygiene and household supplies and other relief items as needed.

In recent years, Cuba also received humanitarian aid from International Organizations (IOs) such as World Food Program and other agencies of the United Nations, as well as directly from countries such as Venezuela, China, Russia, Vietnam, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and other countries. Cuba has rejected aid offered by the USA and the European Union, except for Spain and Belgium.

### **Humanitarian Aid Import**

Official figures show that there were 298 vessel calls, importing 330,000 containers measured in TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit) in the Port of Mariel in 2016. Cuba estimates that another 10% of container cargo is still processed at the Havana Old Port. SC Brokerage and Consulting LLC calculates that the container import traffic in all of Cuba may have reached 40,000 TEUs in 2017.

Specific figures for the import of humanitarian aid are impossible to obtain. The "Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información (ONEI)" is the Cuban entity charged with analyzing and reporting on merchandise import and exports; they do not track or report on humanitarian assistance, aid, or donations. But even if they did, the industry's standard practice for charity cargo is to place a very low value on the Bill Of Lading's "Invoice Declaration of Value" portion of donated merchandise in order to avoid excessive customs duties or fees. Thus, even if there was an "official" value of imported humanitarian aid, it would probably be much lower than the true figure.

Based on the author's personal knowledge of the industry as well as interviews with Cuban FBOs, port customs, and stevedoring personnel, it is estimated that approximately 10% of all the containers received in Cuba in 2017 were assigned an "Autorizo de Importacion" from the Empresa Ejecutora de Donativos (EMED) of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Investment (Inversion Extranjera (MINCEX)). Cargos with the "Autorizo de Importacion" are categorized as some type of humanitarian aid (food, hygiene kits, construction materials, water filters, hurricane supplies, etc.).

### **Calculation Methodology**

The formula used to calculate a reasonable volume index (shown as the in-kind value) of imported humanitarian assistance and donated goods to Cuba in 2017 utilizes a base indicator which is the average in-kind dollar value (unit value) of charity containers shipped to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake crisis. This in-kind donation value of \$60,000 is multiplied by the 2,000 EMED licensed containers; thus the following formula is used:  $40,000 \text{ TEUs or } 20,000 \text{ 40-foot containers} \times \$60,000 \times 0.10 = \$120 \text{ million of imported humanitarian assistance to Cuba in 2017.}$

### **Cash Contributions**

It is generally believed that Catholic and Protestant churches in the U.S., philanthropic minded individuals, and Americans and Canadians participating in missionary journeys to Cuba donate cash to help Cuban FBOs purchase food and other needed items. Although the dollar value should be substantial, quantification of cash donations is beyond the scope of this paper, so no attempt was made by the author to calculate donations.

### **Independent FBO initiatives in Cuba**

Cuban FBOs have carved out a constructive space in Cuban society and exhibit a reliable convening capacity with promising results. FBOs demonstrate day-to-day commitment to a wide array of social service projects; this steadfast work grants them respect and recognition as a positive force in Cuban society.

The religious community represents the largest, most cohesive independent network of organizations in Cuba. FBOs have the capacity to:

- Carry out activities in a wide geographic scope
- Exercise the convening power to reach and gather large numbers of people
- Directly reach populations and groups that other organizations cannot access (e.g. prisoners)
- Support and rely on capable professionals within different spheres of society such as the arts, academia, journalism, the media, medicine, the law, etc.

Current and proposed Cuban FBOs initiatives aim to accomplish goals and objectives such as the following:

- ✓ Provide social services and humanitarian aid programs to at-risk vulnerable and marginalized populations:
  - Distribute post-hurricane and other disaster relief assistance
  - Operate community kitchens
  - Distribute food door-to-door to elderly people
  - Provide nursery programs for working mothers
  - Provide transportation for elderly and disabled people
  - Obtain medical supplies and operate private pharmacies
  - Operate first aid facilities (*consultorios*)
- ✓ Build capacity and develop skills:
  - Conduct after-school ethics, civic, and moral values programs for youth
  - Conduct night courses for adults in language and history
  - Provide training for self-employment
  - Offer seminary courses on democracy, freedom of religion, and social responsibility
  - Hold after-school enrichment programs for children
  - Implement entrepreneurial initiatives to generate economic opportunity (*Cuentrapropistas*)
  - Operate libraries and book exchanges

- ✓ Promote and advocate for human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and democratic values:
  - Publish and distribute newsletters, blogs, and other publications to foster freedom of expression and religious freedom
  - Screen films exploring complex moral and ethical issues and conduct post-film discussions
  - Facilitate freedom advocate projects, including dialogue, debate, forums
  - Provide guest speakers for forums and international events
  - Deliver journalism training and activities (*Reporteros Comunitarios*)
  - Monitor and report religious freedom violations
- ✓ Promote networking and collaboration:
  - Sponsor and conduct competitive sporting events
  - Conduct music concerts and events
  - Provide clowns and mimes for parks
  - Support university student clubs in the arts, culture, and history
  - Support arts and festival projects to foster free expression such as public mural painting
  - Produce and distribute films, videos, and other multi-media projects to develop individual and community values

### **Concluding Remarks**

Cuban FBOs demonstrate a strong commitment to integrity, inclusion, outreach, and service. Their proven track record demonstrates their capability to facilitate social service programs, community building programs, and democracy and human rights programs in a sphere totally separate from their own religious activities. FBOs provide a vital civil society platform for Cuban citizens to engage in dialogue, advocacy, and social and political mobilization. Recognizing and supporting Cuban FBOs generates a positive multiplying effect for years to come because it fundamentally supports the ultimate agents of grassroots change: the people, families, and communities of Cuba.

## Definitions & Abbreviations

**FBO:** Faith based organizations; humanitarian relief and development organizations formed by or with direct or indirect relationship to a specific faith community.

**Faith-inspired organizations** are understood as those instituted with a mission statement informed by generalized spiritual principles, perhaps of one of the major world religions, but founded and run independently of any specific identified faith community. (Faith-inspired organizations are sometimes included in one category of reference as FBOs.)

**GOC:** Government of Cuba

**INGO:** International non-profit organizations have the same mission as NGOs, but they are international in scope and have outposts around the world to address specific issues in many countries. An INGO may be funded by private philanthropy or government grants. INGOs should not be confused with international organizations (IOs) which describe groups such as United Nations Organizations.

**Missions:** All forms of evangelical international involvement, whether explicitly religious or not.

**NGO:** Non-Governmental Organizations are organizations of governments (though often funded by the government through grants) that are active in humanitarian, social, and other areas to effect changes according to their objectives.

**OAA:** Outreach Aid to the Americas

**Secular humanitarian organizations** are those formed to engage in relief and development work without reference to spiritual foundations, but rather, are generally organized around “universal” human rights principles.

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